

HUMOR

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

ANALYSIS

"The Martyr" (1923)

There is so much to see in Porter's fiction that critics tend to miss a lot of the humor. "The Martyr" is pure satire and very funny. Porter the Realist is ridiculing sentimental Romantic art, artists, and any society that feeds on sentimental Romanticism, as exemplified by Mexico since the 1920s and epitomized by the famous mural painter Diego Rivera. At first Porter admired Rivera enough to try to sell some of his work to dealers in New York, but she soon grew disillusioned with him.

Ruben is a caricature of Rivera, who was no Rubens, yet nevertheless had a comparable stature and success, reflecting the vulgarity of public taste. Much of the humor in the story is generated by irony. In the first sentence, for example, Ruben is said to be "deeply in love with his model Isabel, who was in turn romantically attached to a rival artist." The story reveals that Ruben is deeply in love with himself. It is also ironic that Isabel rejects "the most illustrious painter in Mexico" in favor of a painter "whose name is of no importance." She has no respect for Ruben. Her pet name "Churro" equates him with a small dog, yet he is proud of this. He "thought it a very delightful name," since the word also means "sweet cake." He is being a sentimental Romantic in ignoring the double meaning and responding only to what is complimentary. Like political liberals, he denies the reality of anything negative about himself. He shakes when he laughs because he is getting fat, connoting self-indulgence and corruption, as with the fat revolutionary leader Braggioni in "Flowering Judas." Among his deadly sins are Pride, Sloth, and Gluttony. He and Isabel eat at a café called The Little Monkeys, implying that they resemble monkeys.

It is ironic that Ruben's "model" is Isabel, for he is her opposite. She is thin, he is fat. The models of Rubens by modern standards look overweight, another detail contrasting the two artists. Further, Isabel is a cynic, Ruben a Romantic. She tears apart the bouquets of flowers he gives her. Her name Is-a-bel suggests that she is a Mexican equivalent of the American Southern belle in being an attractive teaser, user and abuser of men, like Amy in *Old Mortality*, except that Amy is a cool tease whereas Isabel, in the slang of the day, is a "hot tamale." Like Gabriel in the later story, Ruben is a Romantic fool to fall in love with such a woman, for he too is destroyed when he loses her. Gabriel becomes a drunk and Ruben a glutton. Isabel is certainly no model of conduct either as she abuses and mocks her benefactor, in contrast to the people who come on pilgrimages to admire the acclaimed artist. Yet Ruben tells the physician that Isabel "was an angel for kindness." She does resemble Ruben in being vain and self-absorbed, "for sometimes she would stand all day long, braiding and unbraiding her hair." She is just as shallow as she is bored. Ruben adores this vacuous, lazy, nasty abuser for her physical beauty alone—for her appearance, which is the opposite of her true nature. He thinks the "she-devil" is "angelic."

The public is just as wrong about Ruben as he is about Isabel. It is ironic that "everyone declared Ruben would kill on sight the man who even attempted to rob him of Isabel," for all he does is eat. This hero-worship is consistent with the public overestimation of him as an artist. "I sit still; I cannot move anymore." The rich man who buys a painting from Isabel's lover represents the prevailing attitude of buyers in that he chooses the painting only on the basis of the dominant two colors ordered by his decorator. Ruben in despair is comical rather than pitiful: "He thrashed his arms about a great deal"; "He was weeping, and between sobs he ate spoonfuls of soft Toluca cheese, with spiced mangoes"; he "lay down on the floor with his head in a palette of freshly mixed paint and wept vehemently"; "'She used to kick my shins black and blue,' he would say, fondly"; "He hung in all directions over his painting-stool, like a mound of kneaded dough"; "he bulged until he became strange even to himself"; "'The buttons are bursting from his shirt. It is positively unsafe'; "His friends agreed it was getting rather stupid."

Ruben's friend Ramon is like him in being popular though "not a great artist," as suggested by the similarity of their names, five letters beginning with R. Both are essentially commercial rather than serious artists. Ramon "did caricatures, and heads of pretty girls for the magazines." Ruben does the whole figure of Isabel the pretty girl, over and over. Both men have been left by their girlfriends. The comical difference between them is that Ramon is even more shallow than Ruben: "Let me tell you, when Trinidad left me, I was good for nothing for a week." A whole week. Ramon exploits Ruben too, like Isabel but in praise rather than abuse, exalting Ruben for the biography he intends to write about him, "to be illustrated with large numbers of his own character portraits." His depiction of Ruben as the "Inspired and Incomparable Genius of Art on the American Continent" will be an absurdly idealized caricature to "add splendor to the biography, nay to the very history of art itself."

Porter's tone throughout the story is distanced from Ruben by the formality of her style, as when his friends decide to shift the responsibility for helping the great man to a physician at the university: "In the mind of such a one would be combined a sufficiently refined sentiment with the highest degree of technical knowledge. This was the diplomatic, the discreet, the fastidious thing to do. It was done." The death of Ruben is an anticlimax rendered in such a laconic style as to deflate his pretensions: "The proprietor ran to him. Ruben said something in a hurried whisper, made rather an impressive gesture over his head with one arm, and, to say it as gently as possible, died."

The tone of Ruben the Romantic is the opposite of Porter's. He exploits the opportunity to pose as tragic, to make himself a "model"—a hero of Art--by claiming in his last words that he dies as "a martyr to love.... I die of a broken heart!" No, you die of too many hot tamales. The rhythms of sentences mock the pretenses of those who will profit from Ruben's death the more he is idealized. "'That was all, gentlemen,' ended the proprietor, simply and reverently. He bowed his head. They all bowed their heads." They revere a mock martyr rather than the true martyr Jesus who actually did die a martyr to love. The story concludes with comical bathos, mundane exaltation of the flesh rather than the spirit: "'He was also supremely fond of my tamales and pepper gravy,' added the proprietor in a modest tone. 'They were his final indulgence'." Ramon promises the proprietor to commend him in his biography of Ruben, so that the name of his café "shall be a shrine for artists.... Yes, truly, I shall mention the tamales'."

Michael Hollister (2017)